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AUTHOR Flynn, Elizabeth A.
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ABSTRACT

Analysis of 24 sets of journal entries, drafts, and revisions of papers written by college students in literature/composition courses suggested three stages in the process of reading and writing about literature. In the progressive stage, which is based on theories of transactional literary analysis, brief writing exercises, such as journal writing, helped the student reader structure and clarify the literary event before, during, and immediately after reading the work. The transitional phase produced longer practice writings by which the student/readers sought to balance their experiences of the literary event with the perspectives of other readers. In the symbolic phase, students produced completed drafts that explained the position of the literary work in relation to human behavior, literature, or culture. Although the students' writings in the study did not always fall into such neat divisions, these three phases were fairly accurate descriptions of the stages that students were expected to go through in preparing their papers. Based on this research, it appears that student writing will improve in literature/composition courses only if students learn to "decenter" their thoughts, moving from the subjective and narrational modes of thought in their private readings to more objective, analytical modes of thought in their final compositions. (RL)

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Elizabeth A. Flynn
Department of Humanities
Michigan Technological University
Houghton, Michigan 49931

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Defining Stages in the Process of Responding to and Writing About Literature

The literature/composition hybrid which is an institution in a number of composition programs, including my own, poses special problems. At Michigan Tech, the controversy over whether the course is really a literature course or a composition course is reborn every year, usually about the time book orders are due for HU 103, "Literature, Composition, and Human Values." Some colleagues defend their decision to indulge in literary analysis and to assign very little writing. Others insist that the course is designed primarily to teach writing and is not an "introduction to literature" course. Still others, disturbed by the schizophrenic nature of HU 103, suggest that it be dropped from the curriculum entirely.

The problem is not unique to Michigan Tech as Donald Daiker makes clear in his paper, "Integrating Composition and Literature: Some Practical Suggestions," delivered at the 1979 MMLA Convention. He laments the fact that in literature/composition courses at Miami University, where he teaches, "the secondary goal of literary instruction consistently overwhelms the primary goal of writing instruction."[1] His paper is an attempt to restore composition to its proper place, and he makes some concrete suggestions about how to bring about such a restoration. According to Daiker, teachers should devote as much attention to writing as they do to reading, they should assign works which are accessible to students, and they should make assignments which emphasize characterization rather than literary technique. To illustrate the approach he advocates, he describes a four-week unit on Hemingway's The Sun Also Rises and provides examples of writing assignments which will help develop writing

abilities. One such writing assignment is, "Show that in the first two chapters of The Sun Also Rises, Hemingway characterizes Robert Cohn as a person who does not control his own life but is controlled by others." Another is, "Show that Jake is accurate in describing himself as a 'rotten Catholic.'" Such topics allow students to write about the novel without learning a sophisticated critical vocabulary.

But even if emphasis is placed on composition in a course such as the one Daiker describes, there is still an important reading component which cannot be ignored. Students will not be able to discuss Robert Cohn or Jake Barnes if they are incapable of reading The Sun Also Rises. In Daiker's course, as in most literature/composition courses, students must be able to read effectively in order to write convincing essays. Courses in which students are asked to write about literature are reading courses as well as writing courses, and teachers would do well to recognize this reality. If composition courses should be informed by an understanding of the nature of the composing process, literature/composition courses should be informed by an understanding of the nature of the reading/writing process. The aim of my paper is to suggest some stages in the process of reading and writing about literature.

My observations are based upon an examination of journal entries, drafts, and revisions written by students in sections of HU 103 taught by a colleague and myself last spring. The design of our courses reflected recent developments in composition theory as well as developments in reader response theory. Students read nine short stories and a novel in both courses. The ten-week quarter was divided into four units: three weeks were devoted to characterization, three to setting, three to imagery, and the remaining week was devoted to an analysis of the novel. In each three-week unit, students read three short stories, responded to them in their journals, wrote a draft of an essay focusing on one of the stories, and revised the draft at least once on the

basis of feedback from peers and from the instructor. They had ample time, in other words, to re-read and to re-write. They were encouraged to engage in the numerous activities which make up the composing process such as "inventing" a topic, locating a central idea, and revising. They were also encouraged to "transact" with the texts in ways which would allow for both individual expression and group response.

Reader response theorists such as Louise Rosenblatt, David Bleich, and Wolfgang Iser[2] have formulated what might be called a "transactional" theory of the reading process. They see the reading act as an "event," a word which suggests a dramatic encounter. Readers share in the creation of the meaning of a text by bringing to bear upon it their personal histories, their private associations. No two readers respond to a text in precisely the same way, therefore. Each reader finds a slightly different message there.

In the HU 103 course, students were encouraged to create their own "events," their own personal encounters, in their journals. They were given few guidelines on how to respond or what to respond to and so they all produced highly individualized entries. At the same time, they were given an opportunity to share ideas generated by journal entries in class discussions and their more carefully formulated responses--their essays--in group critique sessions and so they were able to modify their original impressions and appreciate the diverse responses that a single story can evoke. In Bleich's terms, they were given an opportunity to "negotiate" their understanding of the text with other members of the class and with the instructor. Through interaction, students were able to evaluate their own reading of the work and to alter their original impressions on the basis of new knowledge acquired.

My analysis of student writing in HU 103 was aimed at charting the reading/writing process by noting the changes students made as they re-read and re-wrote. I was interested in seeing how "transactions" with works changed

as students proceeded through drafts of their papers. My method was to analyze twenty-four sets of responses to short stories, each set consisting of a journal entry, one or more drafts, and a final paper. Since I was primarily interested in delineating the stages in a complex process, I decided to look only at sets of papers in which the changes students made were pronounced. I was looking for successful revisions rather than typical revisions.

I should preface the discussion of my findings with a brief definition of the term "stage." Enlightened teachers of composition know that the composing process is recursive. We no longer speak of a simple linear progression, and so the word "stage" would seem to be outmoded. In using the term, however, I am not denying the recursive nature of the process. Rather, I am suggesting that recursion and linearity are not mutually exclusive. As Nancy Sommers points out, the writing process is a series of different levels or cycles. She says in "Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers" that the same sub-processes are present in each cycle of the writing process, but they are present in different proportions. Sub-processes recur, but they do not recur in the same way in later levels or cycles of the process. Sommers illustrates the phenomenon as follows: "Even though . . . experienced writers place the predominant weight upon finding the form of their argument during the first cycle, other concerns exist as well. Conversely, during the later cycles, when the experienced writers' primary attention is focused upon stylistic concerns, they are still attured, although in a reduced way, to the form of the argument."[3] In speaking of "stages," therefore, I am speaking of large patterns--of processes rather than sub-processes. I am attempting to identify cycles or levels rather than recurring concerns.

In analyzing the twenty-four sets of written responses, I detected broad patterns which correspond in some ways with the patterns Joseph Comprone identified in his paper, "Burke's Dramatism as a Means of Using Literature to Teach

Composition," delivered at the 1979 MMLA Convention.[4] Comprone found that writing about literature can be classified into three phases or stages--the progressive, the transitional, and the symbolic. The progressive stage, according to Comprone, is defined by brief writing exercises that help the student reader structure and clarify the literary event before, during, and immediately after actual reading is in progress. The transitional phase is defined by longer practice writings that will enable the student reader to approach the experienced event as a means of clarifying the perspectives of other readers; the symbolic phase is defined by a completed draft explaining what the event produced by the work means in relation to human behavior, literature, or culture. In this final stage, the critical writer sees the completed event as a symbolic action clarifying a perspective on life in general.

In some ways, the writing assignments in HU 103 corresponded with this three-phase classification. Journal entries allowed students to respond to the literary event immediately after the story was read and so paralleled what Comprone calls the progressive phase. Drafts and discussions of drafts encouraged students to re-think the original story and so provided a transitional phase. Final papers necessitated that students see the work in relation to a larger context and so represented a kind of symbolic phase.

The three phases are fairly accurate descriptions of the stages we hoped our students would go through in revising their papers. In actuality, however, the papers themselves fell into no such neat piles. In some cases, final papers bore no resemblance to the symbolic phase in that they provided no clarifying perspective on life in general, or even on the meaning of the story. Some journal entries, in contrast, contained germs of symbolic expression. I decided that the three terms are more useful as descriptions of cognitive processes rather than written products. Students were sometimes arrested at the progressive stage even though they submitted papers which they thought were

final papers. Or they were unable to move beyond the transitional phase into the symbolic phase even after several revisions. The terms are more accurate as indicators of the situation of the reader in relation to a text rather than as indicators of particular kinds of writing tasks.

I found evidence of reading in the progressive mode primarily in journal entries, but also in later drafts and in final papers. It is characterized by identification with characters in the story, an indication of the active participation of the reader, and also by reliance on plot summary rather than analysis, by description rather than critical comment, by subjectivity rather than objectivity. Reading in this mode is characterized by uncertainty, by questions rather than answers, and by an accumulation of detail which is unfocused.

Reading in the transitional phase is sometimes in evidence in journal entries, but more often in early drafts of papers. Details are fewer in number, and they are developed more fully. Some summary of the plot of the story may be present, but the student is clearly moving toward greater objectivity and a sharper focus.

Reading on the symbolic level is interpretive. Students take an objective stance in relation to the work; personal considerations are replaced by social considerations. In order to reach the symbolic phase, most students clearly have to re-read and re-think the story. Frequently, students find an entirely new focus in this phase, sometimes subordinating their previous idea about the story to their new interpretation, sometimes abandoning the previous idea entirely.

The following papers written by a student in HU 103 illustrate the three stages very well. For this assignment, students were asked to write an analysis of a character in John Updike's "A&P."

JOURNAL

The story "A&P" is a story that is interesting, but seems to drag on slightly. I really like the detail, and special literary effects. One such example is when the author uses the metaphor "outside the sunshine is skating around on the asphalt." That puts a good picture in your mind of the type of day it is outside. The way the author described the girls was unique as well. The descriptions are a little strange also. For instance the author, when describing the girls says one has a chubby berry face with lips all bunched together under her nose. I am not quite sure of exactly what a chubby berry face is but a beautiful woman does not come to mind for sure. The reference made to the woman's lips bunched under her nose has implications of being downright ugly. When the author says that the cute one's hair hadn't quite frizzed right, I am not exactly sure what that means, but the descriptions are really neat. It is obvious that Sammy feels that the girls are sexually attractive. He says things like, "In come the girls wearing nothing but bathing suits, as if they were obscene or something." Later on he seems to be fascinated by the fact that the Queen's suit is down below her upper shoulders. He says that it is just "her" between the suit and her head.

DRAFT

Sammy, in the short story "A&P" is a person who feels the girls in the store are sexually attractive. There are many inferences in the story that reflect this feeling or opinion of Sammy's.

In the very first sentence of the story, Sammy makes mention that the girls walked in nothing but bathing suits. This is suggestive that he finds something unique in the fact that the girls are wearing nothing but suits, as if to suggest they are indecent. Sammy later makes reference to the sweet broad soft looking can [of one of the girls]. The word sweet here seems to indicate that Sammy enjoys the scenery. Later on Sammy says that they don't even have shoes on. The don't even shows that Sammy is surprised at the fact that they don't have shoes on. If he would have just said, "they don't have shoes on," that wouldn't nearly have been so suggestive of surprise....

FINAL PAPER

Sammy is a person that is anti-establishment. Throughout the entire story, Sammy continually criticizes old people, and other things established in this world. I plan to show that this attitude of Sammy's is pushing him to search for something better that he thinks can be found in life.

It is quite obvious that Sammy is quite critical of old people. An illustration of this attitude can be found in the case where Sammy describes the woman at the cash register as being a witch. He describes bitterly how she has probably been watching cash registers for fifty years and he is the first one she caught. He seems to take this incident as an attack on himself--establishment against him. Sammy then describes the people in the store

> as sheep. This surely is a derogatory term, implying their ignorance and that he is better and wiser somehow. Again these people represent the established people in the world, which he is so critical of. Sammy also shows his bitterness and rejection of material objects of the establishment such as the record albums and toys that fall apart. Sammy refers to his dislike of the people in the store once again when he describes them as scared sheep in a pen, bumping into each other. Sammy shows another rejection of the establishment, this time being the church. He says Lengel is dreary, teaches Sunday school and the rest. Sammy is obviously against the established church. After Sammy quits, Lengel appears very old and gray, just like all the other sheep in the store. He sees Lengel then as part of the establishment.
>
> The girls that walk in the store represent antiestablishment thinking to Sammy. They are barefoot and appear seductive, although they are a distance from the beach. They are against the establishment, an attitude he likes. Queeny's shoulder straps are even down, not something the average woman would do in a food store. The girls walk around the store with an attitude of control and assurance, although surely anti-establishment, exactly what Sammy longs for--freedom. Further illustrating this attitude is Queeny's response to Lengel, in that she says to him that they are dressed decently. Again this response, especially with the fact that her lip juts out and that she says what she wishes, proves to be the attitude Sammy seeks after.
>
> This attitude found in the girls is what to Sammy he has been looking for all along. By quitting the job (establishment) and chasing after the girls it is evident that he has finally found, in the girls, what he has been searching for: an escape from the establishment which he so dislikes.[5]

The journal reflects the progressive stage, the draft the transitional stage, and the final paper the symbolic stage. In the journal, the student puts himself into the discussion. He tells us what he likes and doesn't like about the story, and he identifies with Sammy, delighting in the sexual attractiveness of the girls. Observations are arranged randomly, and assertions are tentative. In the draft, however, the tone is more certain and ideas are arranged more carefully. The writer still identifies with Sammy, still delights in the sexual attractiveness of the girls, and still relies on the chronology of the story for the arrangement of ideas, but we no longer find use of the pronoun, "I," and we no longer find judgmental statements. The final paper represents a

kind of breakthrough. The student begins with an assertion about Sammy which is clearly interpretive. Finally we find some analysis of Sammy's character. Now the student subordinates the seductiveness of the girls to his idea that Sammy is anti-establishment. Sammy is seen in relation to society rather than in relation to the student.

My study has convinced me that writing will improve in literature/composition courses only if students learn to move from the progressive phase through the transitional phase and finally to the symbolic phase. Their ability to write convincing essays about literature is dependent upon their ability to move from subjective and narrational modes of thought to more objective, more analytical modes of thought. Students must learn to "decenter," to move beyond the limitations of their private reading events and to experience other possible approaches to the text. Students who are unable to do so tend to form a kind of dependency upon their initial responses to a work and so they rehash their ideas without re-thinking them or without re-reading in creative ways. Reading events are re-played rather than renewed.

I have already described some strategies to get students to decenter such as having them share their responses in group critique sessions and in class discussions. Other possible strategies include having students role-play situations in stories, either verbally or in writing, asking them to write informal assignments which demand that they consider a perspective on a story which they might not previously have considered, or even asking them to read some literary criticism. The idea is to introduce them to a community of responses so that they can let go of their initial impressions and approach a text again and again in a receptive way. Decentering makes re-reading possible.

An interesting but unexpected result of my study concerns current reader response theory. It occurs to me that much of what has been written about the transaction between readers and texts deals with a single "event," a single

reading, rather than with a series of re-readings. Perhaps we need to extend the work of Rosenblatt, Iser, Bleich and others by defining the reading process more broadly. Perhaps we should begin to look more carefully at successive reading events in order to see how readers change their perspectives on a particular work over a period of time. Even reading theorists such as Frank Smith and the Goodmans speak of the reading process as if texts were read at one point in time. The excellent work which is now being done on the composing process can suggest fruitful ways of inquiring into the mysteries of the reading process.

NOTES

[1]Donald Daiker, "Integrating Composition and Literature: Some Practical Suggestions," delivered at the MMLA Convention, Indianapolis, Indiana, November, 1979, p. .

[2]Louise M. Rosenblatt, The Reader, the Text, the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work (Carbondale, Ill.: So. Ill. Univ. Press, 1978); David Bleich, Subjective Criticism (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1978); Wolfgang Iser, The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1974); Wolfgang Iser, The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1978).

[3]Nancy Sommers, "Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers," College Composition and Communication, 31 (December, 1980), 387.

[4]Joseph Comprone, "Burke's Dramatism as a Means of Using Literature to Teach Composition," delivered at the MMLA Convention, Indianapolis, Indiana, November, 1979.

[5]Errors have been corrected in these papers.